

# Comcast to launch discounted Internet for low-income families

August 31 2011, By Bob Fernandez

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Fulfilling a pledge to the federal government when it acquired NBC Universal Inc., Comcast Corp. is launching a program to offer \$9.95-a-month Internet service for low-income families with school children.

David Cohen, an executive vice president and the chief proponent of Internet Essentials inside the [cable company](#), said Tuesday that Comcast has been rolling out the Internet Essentials program nationally in its cable-TV franchises. The program, which is scheduled to continue for three years, will be available to 2.5 million to 3 million children in the United States.

Comcast is the nation's largest cable-TV provider, serving many big cities - among them, Miami, Houston, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, in addition to Philadelphia. Cohen spoke Tuesday to The Philadelphia Inquirer's editorial board about the program.

Qualifying for the service is simple, company officials say. Children eligible for free lunches under the federal National School Lunch Program also qualify for Internet Essentials. In an attempt to inform parents about the new program, thousands of school districts have been asked to distribute information pamphlets about Internet Essentials in packets sent home with children.

Along with the discounted monthly Internet service, Comcast also will provide families who qualify for Internet Essentials with a voucher that

enables them to purchase a \$150 Internet-ready laptop computer from Dell or Acer, two PC manufacturers participating in the program. Comcast says it is subsidizing some of the cost of the computers.

Comcast says it won't require activation or modem fees with Internet Essentials, or require participants to sign a contract. It also will freeze the \$9.95 monthly rate for the duration of the program.

Cohen said the program is a high priority for Comcast and that it should help bridge the "digital divide" between middle-class and wealthy families who have high adoption rates for Internet and those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder who lag in Internet adoption. Roughly 27 percent of Americans don't have access to the Internet, Cohen said.

The program - or one like it - was contained as a provision in the Federal Communications Commission's 275-page order allowing Comcast to acquire NBC Universal Inc. earlier this year. Extending broadband service to more Americans has been an oft-expressed goal of FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski.

Cohen said that Internet Essentials was a "huge positive story" and that "there is no hook with this program." Comcast would like eligible families to enroll and "we are trying to create an echo chamber where people call the school district or us" about the program.

Comcast couldn't estimate how many people would participate in the program. The discounted Internet rate, though, could be available to participants for longer than three years. Comcast says it will maintain the \$9.95 monthly rate for as long as a family has a school-age child eligible for the National School Lunch Program - even if that extends beyond three years.

For information on Internet Essentials, English speakers can call 1-855-846-8376 and Spanish speakers, 1-855-765-6995.

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